

VZCZCXYZ0000
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHNT #0947/01 2271048
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 141048Z AUG 08
FM AMEMBASSY TASHKENT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0159
INFO RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE
RUEHAH/AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT 4273
RUEHTA/AMEMBASSY ASTANA 0487
RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK 4890
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 0742
RUEHDK/AMEMBASSY DAKAR 0302
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 0769
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 4470
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 2761
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0781
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 1420
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 1996
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 1401
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2728
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC 0177
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC 0326

C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 000947

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN AND DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/14/2018

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [UZ](#)

SUBJECT: JOURNALIST, ACTIVIST, AND PROTESTANT FACE TRIAL IN
KARAKALPAKSTAN

REF: A. TASHKENT 706
[1](#)B. TASHKENT 819
[1](#)C. TASHKENT 893
[1](#)D. TASHKENT 792
[1](#)E. TASHKENT 843
[1](#)F. TASHKENT 700
[1](#)G. TASHKENT 127
[1](#)H. TASHKENT 749
[1](#)I. TASHKENT 876

Classified By: POLOFF R. FITZMAURICE FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: During a one-day visit to Uzbekistan's Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan on August 7, poloff met with acquaintances of journalist Salidjahon Abdurakhmanov (ref A), human rights activist Akzam Turgunov (ref B), and Protestant Aimurat Khayburahmanov (ref C), all of whom remain in pre-trial detention in Nukus on politically-motivated charges. Sources told poloff that authorities have finished their investigations of all three men and their trials would begin soon, starting with the trial of Khayburahmanov on August 11. Prior to his trip, poloff met in Tashkent with a defense lawyer representing Abdurakhmanov and Turgunov, who provided additional details about their cases. These three cases highlight the particular difficulties faced by independent activists and religious minorities in the Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan, whose leaders might be under greater pressure from Tashkent than other regions to crack down on independent activity. We will continue to advocate with the government for the release of all three men.

[1](#)2. (C) In addition, poloff met in Tashkent with the daughter of dissident poet Yusuf Jumaev, who is imprisoned in Karakalpakstan. The daughter recently visited her father and reported seeing signs that he had been tortured. End summary.

CASE OF HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST AKZAM TURGUNOV

13. (C) On August 4, poloff met in Tashkent with lawyer Rustam Tulyganov, who is currently representing Turgunov, Abdurakhmanov, and Jumaev. Tulyganov explained that Turgunov was first arrested in the town of Mangit in Karakalpakstan for extortion on July 11 after he was hired to represent a local woman in a divorce case. Tulyganov provided poloff with a copy of the police report on Turgunov's case. The police report alleges that Turgunov attempted to blackmail the woman's husband, threatening to seize all of his property. The police report alleges that Turgunov was then arrested after the husband gave him 500,000 soums (378 dollars) on July 11. In reality, Tulyganov explained that Turgunov was invited to a teahouse in Mangit that day by the husband and another man. The two then attempted to give Turgunov 500,000 soums without explanation, which Turgunov reportedly refused to accept. Afterwards, the men left the teahouse, and Turgunov was arrested by police.

14. (C) While Turgunov was arrested with 500,000 soums, according to Tulyganov, he was later charged with demanding 20 million soums (15,000 dollars) from the husband. As a result, Turgunov faces 10 to 15 years' imprisonment under criminal code statue 165 for attempting to extort "an especially large amount" of money. Tulyganov explained that he was trying to argue to authorities that Turgunov was arrested with only 500,000 soums and therefore should be subject to only five to 10 years' imprisonment if convicted. He noted that authorities completed their investigation of Turgunov on July 31, and he expected that Turgunov's trial would commence by the end of August.

15. (C) On August 11, poloff met in Nukus, the capital of the Karakalpakstan Autonomous Republic, with Rabiya Utamuradova, an acquaintance of Akzam Turgunov and resident of Mangit. Utamuradova largely confirmed Tulyganov's account of Turgunov's arrest. She added that when the two men left the teahouse, they reportedly took the 500,000 soums with them. After detaining Turgunov, the two men reportedly had to be called back by police so that Turgunov could be photographed with the money.

16. (C) Utamuradova speculated that Turgunov was targeted by local Karakalpak authorities because of his extensive human rights work in the region. Utamuradova reported that Turgunov had been particularly active in Karakalpakstan over the past year. In September 2007, he successfully defended her brother Tursunbai in court, resulting in her brother's release from pre-trial detention.

TURGUNOV REPORTEDLY TORTURED IN DETENTION

17. (C) Tulyganov told poloff that when he met with Turgunov at the Nukus pre-trial detention facility on July 14, he observed a large red welt on his back. Turgunov reportedly told Tulyganov that police had poured boiling water on his back in a bid to force his confession. Utamuradova said that she had visited Turgunov at Nukus' pre-trial detention facility on several occasions and had also observed the red welt. Since that incident, Utamuradova said that she had not seen any other evidence of Turgunov being abused in detention. She last saw Turgunov on August 4, and reported that he appeared to be in good health.

SISTER REPORTS DISAPPEARANCE OF HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST

18. (C) Utamuradova reported that her brother Tursunbai, a human rights activist, disappeared in February. According to Utamuradova, Tursunbai was afraid that police were going to charge him with another crime after Turgunov successfully defended him in September 2007. Tursunbai reportedly told his wife he was leaving, but did not explain where, and has not subsequently been in contact with any family members. Utamuradova said she did not know whether Tursunbai had simply vanished or sought political asylum in a third

country.

CASE OF JOURNALIST SALIDJAHON ABDURAKHMANOV

¶9. (C) Poloff also met in Nukus with Bahrom Abdurakhmanov, the brother of journalist Salidjahon Abdurakhmanov, who was detained on drug charges in Nukus on June 7 after authorities allegedly found drugs in his car during a traffic stop (ref A). The night before he was arrested, Bahrom reported that his brother parked his car in a factory parking lot. He speculated that authorities planted the drugs in his brother's car that night.

¶10. (C) Bahrom argued that his brother was targeted by local Karakalpak authorities for his journalism on the independent uznews.net website, which had been frequently critical of them. Salidjahon also formerly worked as a journalist for Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and the Institute for War and Peace Reporting. Bahrom did not believe his brother was targeted by authorities in Tashkent, because his brother only wrote about local matters in Karakalpakstan. Bahrom explained that authorities searched Salidjahon's apartment after his arrest on June 8 and seized his computer and all of his work documents. He questioned why authorities would

seize such items if they were simply investigating a drug possession charge.

¶11. (C) Bahrom speculated that his brother might also have been targeted after he served as a point of contact in Karakalpakstan for New York Times reporter Sabrina Tavernise, who traveled to Uzbekistan on a tourist visa in May and later published three articles on the country, including one on cotton production and its negative effects upon Karakalpakstan's environment. Bahrom said that his brother helped arrange meetings for Tavernise with farmers and other individuals and accompanied the reporter on her travels through Karakalpakstan. He noted that his brother was under heavy surveillance both during and after Tavernise's trip.

ABDURAKHMANOV NOW FACING MORE SERIOUS CHARGE

¶12. (C) Bahrom reported that police had recently completed their investigation of Salidjahon and he expected that his brother's trial would commence within in the next few weeks. Bahrom added that authorities upgraded the charge against Salidjahon from simple possession of a narcotic substance (criminal code statute 276 clause 2A), which carries a maximum sentence of three to five years' imprisonment, to possession of a narcotic substance with intent to distribute (criminal code statute 273 clause 5), which carries a stiffer penalty of 10 to 20 years' imprisonment. Ironically, Bahrom reported that authorities decided to upgrade the charge against Salidjahon after blood tests reportedly demonstrated that Salidjahon had not recently used drugs. Thus, according to Bahrom, authorities had no choice but to either release Salidjahon or accuse him of dealing drugs. According to Bahrom, other than the drugs allegedly found in his car, authorities have not yet shared with him or Tulyganov any evidence that Salidjahon either used or sold drugs.

¶13. (C) Bahrom reported being able to visit Salidjahon at Nukus' pre-trial detention facility on a regular basis. He said that he had last seen Salidjahon on August 6 and that he appeared to be in good physical condition. However, Bahrom said that his brother was beaten by police before he was placed in the pre-trial detention facility.

CASE OF PROTESTANT AIMURAT KHAYBURHMANOV

¶14. (C) In Nukus, poloff also discussed the case of Aimurat Khayburahmanov, a Protestant from Nukus who faces criminal charges of illegally teaching religion (criminal code article 229) and "terrorism" (criminal code article 244) with Salavat Serikbayev, the leader of Khayburhmanov's church in

Karakalpakstan. Serikbayev largely confirmed the contents of a July 14 Forum 18 article on Khayburahmanov, including that he had been beaten in pre-trial detention. Serikbayev explained that while members of his congregation are frequently detained and fined for illegally teaching religion, this was the first time he had heard of a Protestant being charged with "terrorism" in Uzbekistan, which is usually applied only to suspected Hizb ut-Tahrir members and other alleged Muslim extremists.

¶15. (C) Serikbayev said that Khayburahmanov was originally arrested during a private meeting (not a religious ceremony) at his pastor's home on June 10. Police raided the home, detained Khayburahmanov and the pastor, and seized religious literature, including material that had been legally imported into the country by the Bible Society of Uzbekistan. Ironically, police charged Khayburahmanov with teaching religion illegally to his own pastor. The pastor has not yet been formally charged. Serikbayev speculated that police

targeted Khayburahmanov because he had already been convicted of an administrative offence and was fined earlier this year, and thus it was easier to build a criminal case against him than the pastor.

¶16. (C) Serikbayev believed that Karakalpak authorities seek to make an example of Khayburahmanov, a relatively low-ranking Church member, and scare other Protestants in the region. Serikbayev explained that his church, which at the time was the only legally-registered Protestant church in Karakalpakstan, lost its registration in 2006. Afterwards, the activities of Serikbayev's church and all of its members became illegal overnight (Comment: A prominent human rights activist explained to poloff that Karakalpaks are traditionally less devoutly Muslim than Uzbeks. As a result, he noted that Christian groups have made greater inroads in attracting converts in Karakalpakstan than in other regions of the country. If true, this might partly explain the particular lack of tolerance demonstrated by Karakalpak authorities towards religious minority groups which are seen as engaging in missionary work. End comment.)

¶17. (C) Serikbayev reported that Khayburahmanov's father and his lawyer were last granted access to him on July 20. Since that time, authorities have reportedly refused to let either Khayburahmanov's family members or lawyer see him.

TRIAL AGAINST KHAYBURAHMANOV COMMENCED ON AUGUST 11

¶18. (C) On August 8, Serikbayev called poloff in Tashkent and reported that authorities had completed their investigation of Khayburahmanov and that his trial would begin at the Nukus Criminal Court on August 11. Poloff has since been unable to reach Serikbayev for an update on the trial, but will continue to follow the case closely.

MFA YET TO RESPOND TO DIPLOMATIC NOTE

¶19. (C) The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has yet to respond to an Embassy diplomatic note from July 21, that raised the Embassy's concern over the detention of Abdurakhmanov and Turgunov and requested additional information on their cases.

On July 30, the MFA responded to an earlier Embassy diplomatic note raising concern over the detention of two human rights activists during poloff's visit to Andijon province in June (ref D). The MFA's diplomatic note from July 30 denied that the activists were detained because of poloff's trip and went on to accuse poloff by name of "obviously striving to worsen the image of Uzbekistan before the international community." The diplomatic note also threatened "to reserve the right to reassess" poloff's actions in the country as "inappropriate for his status and stay in the republic."

TURGUNOV AND ABDURAKHMANOV CASES RAISED AT OSCE

¶20. (C) On August 5, the Charge of the United States at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) raised concern to Uzbek OSCE Charge Kadr Yusupov over the detention of Abdurakhmanov and Turgunov, as well as the recent imprisonment of two Jehovah's Witnesses from Margilan (ref C). Yusupov said that he would pass the message to his capital, but explained that there were internal forces creating obstacles to human rights. Specifically, certain members of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Secret Service, and the Minister of Defense, including some Generals, work against the government's efforts to improve relations with the West, according to Yusupov. He indicated

that these officials were responsible for arresting human rights activists, allegedly without the President's knowledge.

DAUGHTER ALLOWED TO SEE JUMAEV, ALLEGES TORTURE

¶21. (C) On August 11, poloff met at the Embassy with Feruza Yusuf Kizi, the daughter of dissident poet Yusuf Jumaev, who is imprisoned at the Jaslyk prison in Karakalpakstan. Feruza reported that she was allowed to visit her father in Jaslyk for the first time on August 2, spending a day and half with him. Feruza said that she observed evidence that her father had been tortured, including bruises on his head, chest, and legs. According to her, his feet were also completely swollen (Note: Prison authorities have been accused before of severally beating inmates on the soles of their feet. End note.) Prison authorities also reportedly refused to allow Feruza to provide her father with medication for a preexisting heart ailment. Her father allegedly told her that he was beaten on August 1, the day before her visit (Comment: While disturbing, it is impossible for us to verify Feruza's account of her father's condition. It is particularly difficult for us to understand why prison authorities would allegedly beat Jumaev one day before allowing his daughter to see him. The Jumaev case previously has been the source of many unconfirmed rumors, see refs E and F. Nevertheless, we will continue to meet with family members and monitor Jumaev's condition as closely as possible. End comment.)

¶22. (C) Feruza also reported last seeing her brother Mashrab, who was sentenced to three years' imprisonment in January for allegedly assaulting a man with a knife (ref G), in the Mazil prison colony in Qarshi in May. As far as she knew, her brother was still incarcerated at the prison colony. She also confirmed again that her other brother Bobur had left Uzbekistan and was applying with other family members for refugee status with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

COMMENT

¶23. (C) The three cases of Turgunov, Abdurakhmanov, and Khayburahmanov highlight the particular difficulties faced by independent activists and religious minorities in the Autonomous Region of Karakalpakstan. Activists have long experienced greater harassment in Karakalpakstan than other parts of the country. The region also lacks a single registered Protestant church, making any religious activities by Protestants in the region illegal. Given the region's status as an autonomous republic for the Karakalpak ethnic minority and its especially poor economic and environmental conditions, authorities in Nukus may be under greater pressure from Tashkent than other regions to crack down on any independent activity.

¶24. (C) The three cases also are indicative of a recent backward trend on human rights in Uzbekistan, which also has seen the airing of documentaries on Uzbek television attacking Radio Free Europe journalist and religious minorities (refs H and I), the apparent banning of Human

Rights Watch director Igor Vorontsov from returning to Tashkent, and an up-tick in harassment of activists in the Ferghana Valley, Jizzakh, and Samarkand regions (septel). If convicted, Turgunov and Abdurakhmanov would be the first prominent activists sentenced to prison since the release of several political prisoners earlier this year. The charges against Khayburahmanov, as well as the recent imprisonment of

two Jehovah's Witnesses in Margilan, also appear to contradict the government's expressed interest in conducting an exchange of letters with Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom John Hanford. As the Uzbek OSCE Charge Yusupov suggested in Vienna, it is possible (though far from certain) that certain anti-Western elements in the government are seeking to use human rights violations as an effective wedge to drive Uzbekistan and the United States further apart. We will continue to engage the Uzbek government on these cases and advocate strongly for the release of all three men.

BUTCHER